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Over interpretatie

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Summary

This study is concerned with processes of interpretation in language use. Two questions are central to this concern: which aspects of language use are most crucial to interpretation, and which is the role of the context of language use in interpretation? Two aspects of the concept 'context' will be examined in detail: the context as guiding principle in the processing of language use, and the context as environment in which language use occurs; or put in another way: context will be examined from a cognitive psychological and from a sociolinguistic point of view. In particular, this study aims at putting both points of view into a single perspective.

In Chapter 1 the theoretical background of this study is provided. After a discussion of the general problem of how context influences processes of perception and interpretation in general (1.1.), an outline is given of two basic models of interpretative processes, namely, data-driven and conceptually driven types of processes. It appears that human interpretation is best conceived of as a mixed type of processing between these two basic types (1.2.). Still, the social position of the interpreter (processor) itself forms an important aspect of the interpretation of language use; the input to be processed is not the only input to the process, but information about the social situation and the position of the interpreter in it form part of that input as well (1.3.). Only by taking this position into account, an adequate picture of the context can be developed. 'Context' should be seen as a highly flexible concept. Context is, in a dynamic model, both input to and result of interpretative processing operations (1.4.). The concept 'context' is then discussed in relation to the field of sociolinguistics. In sociolinguistics, context is regarded less in its processing function; rather, the function of the concept is descriptive in the sense that a taxonomy of situational factors provides a model in terms of which actual situations of language use can be described. John Gumperz, an important researcher in the field of sociolinguistics, tries to take into account aspects of processing, along with his descriptive sociolinguistic work (1.5.). An important role in Gumperz's work is played by the concept 'contextualization cue': several aspects of the linguistic utterance and the way it is realized by the speaker, serve to provide clues to the interpreter in order to attach a contextual interpretation to the utterance. In 1.6. I give an extensive account of research that is conducted on the basis of this concept. In 1.6.3.1. concrete linguistic and behavioral elements which may function as contextualization cues are discussed. In 1.6.3.2. I summarize the most important theoretical considerations behind this concept, while in 1.6.3.3. the most important aspects of research methods as applied to the concept of contextualization cue are discussed.

In Chapters 2 and 3 I present the results of an explorative study into the nature of interpretative processes and the role of contextualization cues in them. In these Chapters I try to highlight the main points of

the theoretical perspective as presented in Chapter 1. The part of the study described in Chapter 2 is oriented towards interpretative processes themselves; the part of the study described in Chapter 3 aims at finding patterns of differentiation in interpretative processes in relation to the social and cultural backgrounds of persons who do the interpreting.

In Chapter 2 I describe a series of informal experiments; in these experiments informants are asked to interpret several fragments of language use. These fragments have been taken from several social situations that have actually occurred. Informants had no contextual information at their disposal. The fragments were presented to informants under three subsequent conditions: as a 'bare' transcript containing no more information than just the words uttered in the fragments; as a sound-tape recording; and as a video-recording. (To be sure, the video-recording was not available for all fragments used in these experiments.) This experimental approach was modelled on a procedure of manipulating social data, as developed by K. Jennings and H. Mehan (described in Mehan & Wood 1975: 235-237), called 'enjambing'. - In 2.1. I critically discuss the work of John Gumperz; from this discussion, I derive a detailed formulation for the central problem of this study: which is the nature of contextually-bound processes of interpretation, and how do contextualization cues function in these processes? In 2.2. I describe the procedure of enjambing as applied in these experiments. The general idea behind the use of this procedure, is that it provides a double opportunity to gain insight into how interpretative processes develop and on which basis: contextual knowledge is neutralized, and informants are forced to reconstruct this knowledge from the language material which is presented to them in the course of the experiment, on the basis of conventionalized knowledge about the contextual use of language. Furthermore, the language material is manipulated in two respects: the amount in which it is presented (words; clauses; a short series of clauses and/or speaker turns), and the channel through which it is presented (plain text; sound; full picture). Comparison of these conditions subsequently provides insight into which cues are active in which stage of the interpretative process. In 2.3. the results of the experiments are discussed. It appears that informants predominantly use a mixture of data-driven and conceptually driven interpretative strategies. Interpretation tends to be conceptually driven as soon as this is possible, and data-driven as long as it is necessary. Imputations about the distribution of knowledge among the participants in the social situation from which the language materials are taken, are decisive in the interpretation. 'Keyings' (as defined by Goffman 1974) are specific instances of distribution of social knowledge. Keyings are difficult to interpret from an outsider's perspective. The limitations on what informants can interpret in the experiments, and on the other hand, the remarkable speed and accuracy with which they are able to reconstruct contextual knowledge, are important issues in the discussion which closes Chapter 2: implications for the linguistic concept of meaning, and for an artificial, simulative approach of language use capabilities are discussed.

In Chapter 3 the same approach is adopted in order to investigate sociolinguistic differentiation. In Chapter 2 interpretative processes were examined under the assumption of homogeneity, in order to investigate the nature of the process itself. In Chapter 3, however, differences in the way in which people interpret the same language data are related to differences along sociological dimensions. In Gumperz's work these two aspects (the nature of the process itself, and differences in the process as related to sociological, in particular ethnic, differences) are often taken together

in a single method of research. This approach is critically discussed, and from this discussion guidelines are derived for a more restricted method of research, which is then implemented in an explorative study. The socio-logical dimension along which differentiation is sought is age. Language use between older and younger people is presented to both older and younger informants; the interpretative results point in the direction of a higher sensitivity to the language use of one's own group; at the same time, however, the younger group has less difficulty in interpreting the older group than the older group has in interpreting the younger.

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